DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 336 CE 063 045

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TITLE Perceptions of Postsecondary Vocational Student Organizations by Recent High School Graduates and Non-Traditional Students.
PUB DATE Dec 92
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention (St. Louis, MO, December 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High School Graduates; Interviews; *Nontraditional Students; Student Attitudes; Student Interests; *Student Motivation; *Student Organizations; *Student Participation; Technical Institutes; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students; Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS Minnesota; *Vocational Student Organizations

ABSTRACT

Perceptions of postsecondary vocational student organizations (VSOs) were solicited from students in several Minnesota technical colleges. Four technical colleges participated in the study; one college agreed to serve as the pilot site to test the methodological procedures. Four focus group interviews obtained participant perceptions and views about selected research topics. Six focus group interviews were held at three technical colleges. At each college, one focus group interview was held with recent high school graduates and one with nontraditional students aged 27 and older. A total of 24 students, randomly selected by college administrators, participated in the two student groups. All focus group interviews were recorded on audiotape. Data were analyzed to determine the emergence of themes. Three factors facilitated or encouraged membership and participation in postsecondary VSOs: instructor influence, opportunity to network with potential employers, and opportunity to list membership on resume. Four barriers to membership and participation were identified: time constraints, family responsibilities, difficulty of finding or affording child care, and lack of instructor interest or commitment. Nontraditional students preferred activities that would enable them to network with potential employers. Younger students preferred social interactions, leadership development, human relations skills, and competitive events. Both groups preferred activities scheduled during the regular school day. (YLB)

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PERCEPTIONS OF POSTSECONDARY VOCATIONAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS BY RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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Background

Vocational student organizations (VSO's) are an integral part of many Minnesota technical college programs. The primary purposes of these VSO's (e.g., NPASO, VICA, DECA, BPA, HOSA) are to develop leadership, citizenship, cooperation, and related employment skills. However, the current postsecondary VSO's are patterned on the secondary VSO model. While this model has been successful with secondary and traditional postsecondary students, with the increasing numbers of non-traditional postsecondary students, one has to question whether this model is appropriate. Because VSO's were originally designed for secondary students, postsecondary advisors possess a limited amount of theory-based knowledge and philosophy for managing and operating the postsecondary VSO. Non-traditional student involvement in VSO's, therefore, may be limited not because

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organizations. They argued postsecondary instructors and advisors ought to be using research and theory that is appropriate to postsecondary students. Support for this contention is noted by authors such as Merriam (1978) who believed that the understanding and integrating principles of adult development would be a real asset in designing adult education experiences.

Piaget (1972) expressed concern for not using a strong theory base for our actions in vocational education. He stated, "Moreover, there are certain branches of instruction ... that we continue to lay down as essential without knowing whether in fact they do or do not attain the utilitarian end that has been traditionally allotted to them" (pp. 6-7).

The literature suggests that individuals at different stages of cognitive and personality development have differing needs (Santrock, 1990; Knox, 1977; Merriam, 1978; Cross, 1981). These theories and principles suggest developmental needs, tasks, or characteristics among selected age groups involved in postsecondary VSO's are, in fact, very different. Consequently, it is logical to expect postsecondary students of various ages to have differing needs and expectations regarding student organizations. The question is 'What are the needs and expectations of traditional and non-traditional postsecondary students enrolled in VSO's and how do these needs and expectations influence the activities and operation of an effective VSO?'

This study, therefore, sought to develop understanding and derive meaning from the perceptions of selected groups of traditional and non-traditional students enrolled in selected Minnesota technical colleges.

of the general structure of the organizations, but because of the programs of activities that do not meet the developmental and current needs of the non-traditional student. This study was an initial step in understanding some of the needs common to traditional and non-traditional students in Minnesota's technical college settings.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to understand and derive meaning from the perceptions of students in several Minnesota technical colleges regarding selected aspects of postsecondary student organizations. Responses were solicited from two categories of technical college students: students who graduated from high school within the past three years or less and students who were 27 or more years of age.

Specific objectives guiding this study were to determine: a) to determine factors that facilitated or encouraged membership and participation in postsecondary vocational student organizations, b) to determine barriers to membership and participation in postsecondary vocational student organizations, and c) to determine the types and structure of VSO activities preferred by students.

Related Literature

The design, operation, and management of vocational student organizations ought to reflect current research and the characteristic needs of the participants within the organization (Migler & Joerger, 1991; Caskey, 1976). Migler and Joerger (1991) addressed vocational education's need to more fully acknowledge and use recently identified and developed theories and research for managing and operating secondary and postsecondary vocational

Procedures

An interpretive research design was employed since the researchers were seeking understanding and meaning . Four technical colleges participated in the study; one college agreed to serve as the pilot site to test the methodological procedures employed in the research design. Four focus group interviews (carefully planned discussion or meetings involving 4-10 people with similar background or characteristics) were used to obtain participant perceptions and views about selected research topics. Prior to the actual interviews, the researchers developed a questioning protocol that contained introductory, transition and key open-ended questions. Approximately 10-15 minutes were devoted to the introductory and transition questions with the remainder of the hour-long group interviews dedicated to the key questions.

Six focus group interviews were held at three technical colleges. At each college, one focus group interview was held with recent high school graduates and one with non-traditional students of ages of 27 years or older. Students were randomly selected by administrators of each college. A total of 24 students participated in the recent high school graduate group as well as the non-traditional student group. All focus group interviews were facilitated by an experienced focus group moderator who was a member of the research team. Another project researcher observed and took notes. All focus group interviews were recorded on audio tape to facilitate the data analysis process.

Analysis of Data

Data collected from the focus group were analyzed according to procedures recommended by Krueger (1988, pp. 112-117). Specifically, the data were analyzed to

determine the emergence of themes.

The research moderator and assistant compared their observations and interpretation of participants responses during a debriefing immediately following the focus group interviews at each technical college. Upon completion of all focus group interviews, complete transcriptions were made of audio recordings which were reviewed for themes that were consistent among the groups of interviewees. Finally the data were compiled in a format which identified the major findings according to the objectives of the study.

Findings

Factors That Facilitated or Encouraged Membership and Participation in Postsecondary Vocational Student Organizations

Students in both age categories cited similar factors that prompted them to join postsecondary vocational student organizations. However, the importance attached to these factors often varied according to the age category of the students. The most commonly cited factor for both groups was instructor influence. Typical comments regarding the importance of instructor influence were:

> *I joined VICA because there was pressure by the instructors.*
>
> *I think the teachers have to push it (joining a VSO) because there is a very important relation between teacher and student.*

Additionally, non-traditional students noted that the opportunity to "network" with potential employers was an important factor in decisions to become VSO members. Selected comments illustrating this concern were:

> *I go to the monthly meetings around the cities so I can meet the people that you are going to be going to for a job.*

We get to meet people out in the industry and see what the latest things are in our field. Also, you meet a lot of employers out there.

In contrast, younger students often cited the opportunity to list membership on a resume as a factor for joining vocational student organizations. The following response was typical of comments regarding this factor.

The instructor said joining (the VSO) would be good for my resume. I guess that was the main reason I joined.

A less prominent factor noted primarily by students in the younger age category was the opportunity to get to know other students through social activities.

Barriers to Membership and Participation in Postsecondary Vocational Student Organizations

"Finding time" was the major barrier to membership and participation for students in both age groups. Both groups cited time constraints due to commuting and working. The following comments reflected this concern:

I think one of the hardest parts about being in an organization and going to school is finding time.

I work 30-40 hours a week, go to school five days a week. I am married, my wife works full time and has a part-time job. I see her one day a week. If I commit to too many things, something is going to fall.

Non-traditional students also stated that competition for time from family and other organizations was a barrier. One student expressed this concern by stating:

... with me being my age, I have meetings just about every night, plus homework, plus a family to take care of. I figured I had enough involvement.

A related concern expressed by participants in the non-traditional group was the difficulty of finding or affording child care. Lack of instructor interest or commitment toward VSO's was noted by participants in both groups as a factor that diminished their interest in joining

or participating in a VSO. Selected student comments illustrating this factor were:

> *A lot of instructors don't believe in organizations.*
>
> *I got no encouragement from the instructors to encourage their students to find about VICA.*

Except for overnight trips, cost of membership was not a major concern. Additionally, non-traditional students indicated that some of the fund-raising activities being used in the VSO's simply did not appeal to them. As one student stated:

> *I think fundraisers where you have people sell things individually really turns people off. ... going door to door does not appeal to me.*

Types and Structure of VSO Activities Preferred by Students

There were pronounced differences in the types of VSO activities or emphases preferred by the two age groups of students. Non-traditional students clearly preferred activities that would enable them to "network" with potential employers, regardless of whether or not they were affiliated with a specific VSO. Although activities that developed leadership, human relations, or other employment skills were valuable, non-traditional students expressed the view that these activities were secondary to meeting and working with potential employers. Student responses reflective of this concern were:

> *An organization should put students in contact with employers. I think that is what the older-than-average student is more concerned with. The more people I meet the better off I'll be.*
>
> *... at our state competition the judges are actually business owners from the metro. They are headhunting, definitely. It is a good opportunity, if you do well, that you could be offered a job.*

However, some non-traditional students suggested that VSO's could also have value in

providing a support network for some students and also in providing a social outlet for others. One student expressed her experience this way:

> *When you have been an abused housewife ... coming to school is frightening. The social part was something I had not been able to experience for a long time. To be with a group of people and to have a good time was a positive experience.*

Younger students, on the other hand, typically suggested continuing the activities already conducted by VSO's, such as social interactions, leadership development, human relations skills, and competitive events. Typical comments reflecting this concern were:

I think it has to sound like fun to join (a VSO). That is really important.

If it sounds like just work, it is not going to be any fun. You will start getting bored.

Students from both groups stressed the belief that a successful VSO would have to have strong student leadership and dedicated instructors. Both groups also noted that more information was needed to inform prospective students about organizations. Overwhelmingly, both groups preferred activities that could be scheduled during the regular school day.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following implications and recommendations are presented:

1. There may be enormous value for current VSO's to affiliate with, and possibly use the names of related trade and professional organizations since they provide many opportunities for students to meet future employers. However, the framework of the current VSO may be used for integrating the programs and policies of a professional organization.

2. Recent high school graduates preferred VSO activities that are social and competitive in nature while non-traditional students preferred VSO activities that enabled them to network with prospective employers. Consequently, advisors need to assess the mix of students and facilitate the development of appropriate VSO activities to meet individuals needs.

3. Advisors need to recognize the constraints that prevent student involvement in VSO's such as daycare, employment, family, financial concerns, and other demands for time. Therefore, advisors need to commit themselves to integrating VSO's into regular program time frames.

4. Students decisions to join VSO's are influenced by the enthusiasm and support of their instructors. Instructors must sell and promote the VSO to students before assuming they will become active participants and leaders.

5. Students value the human relationship skills developed by involvement in VSO activities. Consequently, continued emphasis should be placed on VSO's for effectively developing these skills.

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